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HOMEMAKERS' CHAT

Thursday, October 20 1938

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "MORE UNIFORM AND ADEQUATE TRAFFIC LAWS NEEDED." Information from the Bureau of Public Roads, U. S. Department of Agriculture. Publication available, "Highway Accidents, Their Causes and Recommendations for Their Prevention."

--ooOoo--

Quiz questions are the fad, and I have one of my own to start off with today. How long are a child's legs at the age of 14? If you think that's a silly question, you can answer in Lincoln's famous phrase,-- "Long enough to reach to the floor." But if the child happens to live in Michigan, New Mexico, South Carolina or Texas, they need only be long enough to reach the brake and the clutch of the family automobile, for in those 4 States a minor may legally hold a driver's license at the age of fourteen.

If this information startles you because you live in one of the 25 States which fix a minimum age limit at 16 years, or in one of the 4 that believe 18 years is young enough to start handling a car, how about the 8 States that do not require drivers' licenses at all?

Do you know the different speed limits in the States touching yours? Eight different maximum speed limits are found in 33 States, and 16 States have none. (Yes, I know 33 and 16 add up to 49; the District of Columbia is being counted as a State with respect to traffic regulations.)

Again, if you live in New York State, or any of 26 others, and wish to make a left turn, you stretch out your left arm horizontally. In Kentucky you stretch it upward and in Missouri downward. In Utah, Arkansas and in many cities, you can make a right turn on a red light. In the District of Columbia and 9 States a special arrangement of a red light and a green arrow gives permission to make a right turn. In 20 States you can't make any turn on a red light alone.

These are but a few illustrations of the confusion that results from lack of uniformity in motor vehicle traffic laws in different States. The Bureau of Public Roads of the U. S. Department of Agriculture made a study of highway accidents last year, and found this diversity in laws and lack of laws among the most important causes of accidents. In its report the Bureau says:

"It is generally accepted that the manner of driving a vehicle becomes a habit and that the involuntary reflexes largely govern the handling and control of a vehicle by each individual..... These driving habits, with few exceptions, are formed in a single State and a single community of that State. They are largely the product of the laws and their enforcement by the State and the local community.

10/20/38

"A driver with his driving habits formed in one locality, operating his motor vehicle legally, prudently, and naturally as fixed by the habits acquired under the laws of his home State, is often transformed into a law-breaker and an unsafe driver by crossing the State line."

Some of the fundamental requirements which must be dealt with in arriving at more uniform and adequate traffic laws are:

Proper registration of each vehicle; licensing of drivers; safety patrol or highway police; periodic inspection of motor vehicles; certificate of title and other antitheft provisions; restrictions on speed and driving recklessly or under the influence of liquor or narcotics; rules of the road; traffic-control signs or signals; operator's signals; elimination of glaring headlights; limitation of size, load and speed of vehicles; financial responsibility of drivers; and the reporting of accidents by persons involved therein.

Registration is required in all States, but it is differently handled. There are some variations with regard to certificates of title and antitheft provisions. The requirements for an operator's permit obviously need to be stiffened in many States, especially in respect to physical fitness, good eyesight and hearing, ability to distinguish color, and to read highway signs. Laws should provide for revocation of licenses for serious offenses and strictly enforced.

With so much traveling back and forth across State lines, there should be more uniform laws pertaining to civil liability and financial responsibility. In one-third of all the States at present no reports of accidents are required, and there is a total lack of uniformity in the requirements in the other States. Drunken driving is one of the few dangerous practices which is universally made a criminal offense.

Traffic-control devices are as varied and confusing as hand signals. Speed restrictions vary from 25 to 60 miles an hour, or none at all. However, 44 States have adopted by statute the common law "rule of the road" that no person shall drive a vehicle on a highway at a speed greater than is reasonable and prudent under the conditions then existing. Minimum speed laws in a few States also exist to hurry up the driver who is so slow as to impede traffic. Reckless driving is almost everywhere considered a more serious offense than violation of a speed limit.

Requirements as to lights vary. Glaring headlights are not prohibited everywhere, though they should be. Sufficient highway police patrol is at present lacking in more than half the States. The Bureau of Public Roads believes that an increase in the number of trained highway officers would result in fewer accidents.

Certain fundamental rules of the road which prevailed before we had automobiles are still in force everywhere. We must drive on the right hand side of the road, we must yield right of way at an intersection to the car on our right (unless the intersection is controlled by signs or lights) and we must not pass another car near the top of a hill, on a curve, or at any other place where the vision is obstructed.

10/20/38

The Bureau of Public Roads believes that as such a large number of women drive cars, and drive them carefully and intelligently, they will wish to urge State legislature to adopt the uniform laws prepared by the National Conference on Street and Highway Safety. Women's clubs and other civic bodies throughout the country are waging active campaigns for these laws. Those who would like authoritative reference material for this purpose can get a publication called "Highway Accidents, Their Causes and Recommendations for Their Prevention," from the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. It is free so long as the free supply lasts.
